Depot Town Rag

Volume 22, Number 8

October 2010

HOT NEWS

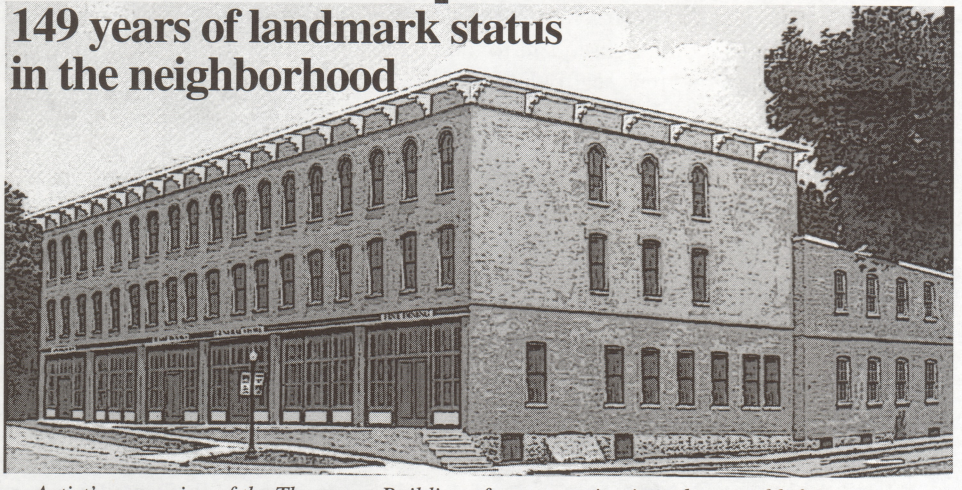
One year after the big fire

100% FREE *RAG* CONTENT

A PUBLICATION OF THE DEPOT TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. The Old Caboose, 400 Market Place, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198

A Sad Sesquicentennial

149 years of landmark status in the neighborhood



Artist's concepion of the Thompson Building after renovation into shops and loft apartments

The Ypsilanti Commercial, 22 May 1869

On the purchase of the property by O.E. Thompson:

"If that corner block don't shine in less than three months, the pride of the depot, set us down as a false prophet. The owners of property in the vicinity seem mightily pleased at the prospect."

From Memories of "Early Depot Town"

-By Joseph H. Thompson, The Depot Town Rag, *April 1990*

I hope that you will pardon me if I begin with the business my parents operated on the corner of River and Cross Streets. It was known as the Thompson Building. My grandfather, Oliver E. Thompson, my father, Benjamin Thompson, my uncles, Edward Thompson and John Thompson, were very busy in the manufacturing of agricultural implements, root cutters, grass seeders, kraut and slaw cutters, and later, porch swings. They employed about 40 men. The also ran a retail business selling coal, building supplies, carriages and wagons, paint and wallpaper and, at one time, sold over 200 bicycles in one year. They had the agency for the Nichols and Shepherd threshing engines that were made in Battle Creek. I recall that they had a crew of paperhangers and painters that were busy in the city in that line of work.

In the Thompson Building there was also a tailor by the name of Otto Biske that made hand-made clothes for many of the people who could afford it. Right next to Mr. Biske's tailor shops was the city fire department where they operated one horse, and a couple of firemen who slept upstairs over the fire equipment. During the off hours, Tommy Wilkinson operated this horse in picking up the refuse on the Depot streets. (You know, they had horses in those days!) And up on the top of the building was a large bell that would ring and the numbers of strokes would tell you what location in town there was a fire burning or being extinguished….

Special commemorative edition

A Thompson Building historical time line

1838- Mark Norris builds the "Great Western Hotel" on the triangle where the depot stands today

1860- MCRR acquires property to continue rail line to the west; Norris demolishes hotel, carries bricks across the street to create new structure

1861- The "Norris Block" opens with businesses on first floor, family apartments above

1862- Civil War begins; building used as barracks by the Fourteenth Michigan Infantry Regiment, known as "Camp Mizner"

1863- Twenty-seventh Michigan Regiment takes over barracks

1869- O.E. Thompson, son of a pioneer family, manufactures wagons, agricultural implements, bicycles

1880s- Thompson paints family name across façade

1895- Professional fire department established. Hose House No. 2 remains until 1898 when east and west sides of town are reunited in a single company across the river *(Now the Michigan Firehouse Museum)*

1902- Twenty-seventh Michigan Regiment stages reunion at the old barracks

1916- O.E.'s grandson, Joseph H. Thompson, opens of the first Dodge automobile dealerships in the country

1950- Thompsons put building up for sale, stands empty for over a year

1960s- Archery range with giant plywood targets over the windows

1970s- David Kircher purchases the building

1988- Paul Klawitter's Antique Mall, Fantasee Lighting among legal tenants

1990- Tattoo Parlor, continued litigation between owner and City

2000s- City places building in receivership to Barnes, then sold to J.C. Beal Co.

September 2009- Fire destroys most of the building, litigation expands to new levels *[See reports and progress on page 2]*

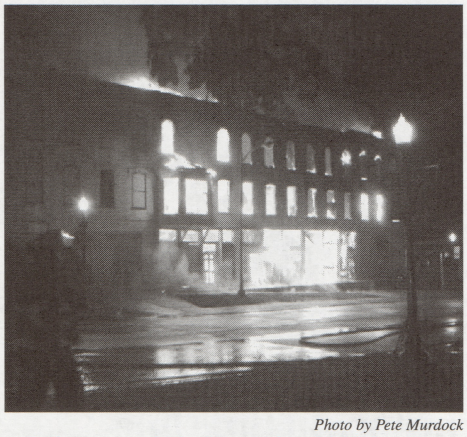


Photo by Pete Murdock

Fully engaged, the September 2009 fire drew firefighters from several communities

Beal representatives and City officials discussed future possibilities on 25 September, the morning after the fire

Fire! Speculation! Arrest!

Investigation into cause and clean-up drags on

What the experts say:

Highlights from the August 4, 2010 Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates (WJE) draft report to the City Attorney

WJE's study gives a view of a disinterested party with greater objectivity than casual passers-by on the street. Even their description of the fire has a point of view not seen in previous reports: "The building, originally constructed in 1861-62, succumbed to fire on September 23, 2009. Subsequent to the fire, wall bracing, constructed of lumber and pipe scaffolding, which extends into N. River Street and E. Cross Street, was erected to support portions of the west and south walls. "

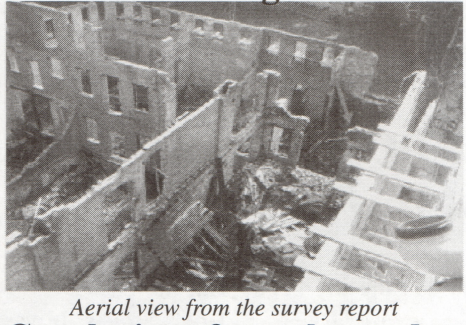
WJE observed the outboard surfaces of the walls from grade and from a platform ladder truck. Inboard surfaces were observed from atop the rubble within the exterior walls. Random brick units were used to determine weight and select portions of the masonry were sounded.

Midwest Consulting, LLC, performed a high-definition survey of west and south walls using laser technology to produce a graphic image indicating contours of the outboard surfaces.

Arson is suspected

21-year-old Jason Robert-Andrew Popiolek, suspected of setting fire to the Thompson Building, turned himself in to authorities in Arizona in late August and was released on $5000 bail.

Can this building be saved?



Aerial view from the survey report

Conclusions from the study:

- It is their opinion that replacement will be a more practical and economical solution
- The white portion of the west wall may be restored and used in future construction
- In its current unbraced condition, collapse of the south wall presents a hazardous condition
- The western, three-story portion of the south wall may be restored, but it may be more practical and economical to replace this section

Tragic fire affects the entire block

Any fire is a tragedy and when it's in a historic building, it seems even more so. But what happens to a building with such protections as a Historic District Ordinance? And what happens to the rest of the commercial neighborhood when traffic is restricted for more than a year while the city and the owner decide what to do next?

A large part of the Thompson Building's recent history has been stand-offs with the city. Since the fire, that argument has focused on the current owner continuing to block vehicular right-of-way on Cross and River Streets. Now it is revealed that plans to repave the streets may be held up by the limited rights-of-way. Every business in the neighborhood has felt the effect of limited access.

The Beal Deal:

The City and developer finally agreed at the end of August on what to do about the burned-out building. All Councilmembers signed the agreement except Brian Robb, who was out of town on vacation. The developer called it "a reasonable timeline."

According to the agreement:

In one year: Stabilize all exterior walls, remove all shoring from right-of-ways, windows and doors secured.

Next year: Remove shoring from Cross Street by April 25, 2011.

Three years: Complete the exterior envelope of the building, roof, stablize walls and all openings sealed with temporary doors and windows.

Insurance: Developer will obtain $2 million in insurance within 10 days of signing the agreement with the city. Secure the precarious east portion of the south wall within 30 days.

Funding: The developer is meeting with previous investors who he says are involved with "several successful breweries." He estimates the total renovation could be at least $4 million and has already received $1.7 million in tax credits from the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) which will be awarded only upon completion of the renovation.

The agreement requires the developer to restore the front façade to the condition it was in before the fire—the derelict building we have seen for the past thirty years.

Thompson Building's owner wins JC award

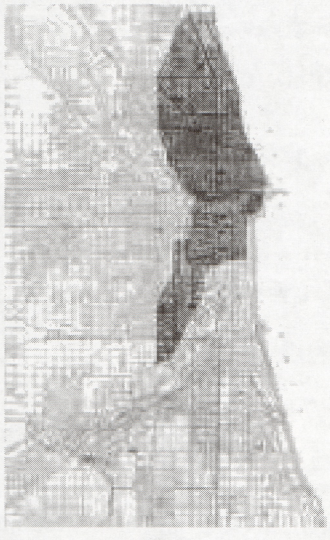
The Michigan Jaycees awarded Stewart Beal their Outstanding Young Michigander Award in August. According to *The Ypsilanti Courier*, "The honor is awarded to an individual who exemplifies the best characteristics of young people between the ages of 21 and 40."

Beal told *The Courier*, "We've had a lot of success in recent years. That success has allowed our company to prosper and at the same time make important contributions within our community." Beal Construction's sign still hangs on the southwest corner of the burned-out Thompson Building with the motto: "Precisely as Intended."

Fires broke out everywhere! Ypsi firefighters called to the "Great Chicago Fire"

-James Thomas Mann

Chicago's 1871 fire looked a lot like last year's fire in Depot Town



Chicago's burn pattern highlighted

At about 9 p.m. on the evening of October 8, 1871, a fire started in or near the small barn behind 137 DeKoven Street, Chicago, Illinois. The region had been suffering from a drought and Chicago, a city made of wood, was a dry tinderbox waiting for a match. This was the start of the Great Chicago Fire that would destroy an area about four miles long and an average of 3/4 of mile wide, covering 2,000 acres of land. Burned in the fire were 17,500 buildings, 73 miles of roads and 120 miles of sidewalks, almost all of which were made of wood. Some 200 to 300 people died in the flames. Another 90,000 were left homeless.

As the fire spread, the mayor sent out a call for help. "Send anything," he pleaded, "to save the city." This was the stuff of legends and one story is that Ypsilanti was the first city outside the greater Chicago area to respond to the call for help.

It is possible, after the message was received by telegraph, that action was taken and, as the Michigan Central train arrived at the depot by Cross and River Streets, the old fire engine, the Neptune, was pushed onto a car. The train would have carried the Neptune and the men with it directly into Chicago where they might have helped to fight the flames and aid those in need.

There is no published account of the men with the Neptune fighting the fire in Chicago but then—and almost forgotten now—was the need closer to home.

More fires break out

"Fires have occurred all over the state," reported *The Ypsilanti Commercial* of Saturday, October 14, 1871. "There is no estimating the amount of lumber destroyed. All kinds of property have been burned, even whole villages. The suffering in our own State, and in Wisconsin and Minnesota, will be great, loudly calling for renewed liberality on the part of our people. The coming winter, at least 200,000 people in the Northwest will have to be fed by their more fortunate fellow citizens, or starve. We endorse the *Detroit Post*, that it is now unwise to rush provisions onto Chicago. Thousands of barrels of provisions are now being wasted in Chicago—no place to store it. If this supply had been kept back, and sent as called for by the needy in our own State, and elsewhere, it would have been far better. And the same applies to money raised. Let it be retained in the hands of local committees until the real want and exigency of winter shall call it forth."

Michigan fires

The same night the fire broke out in Chicago, fire also occurred at Holland, Michigan, destroying the town. Another fire broke out that same night at Manistee and that place went up in flames as well. Flames consumed Port Huron, and burned much of the Thumb region of the state. That same day at Peshtigo, Wisconsin, fire killed 1,200 to 2,500 people. This is still the deadliest fire in American history. It was little noted at the time, and is still only a footnote to the one in Chicago. In every direction were those in need, and Ypsilanti responded.

"Large fire boxes of clothing are made up ready to ship," noted *The Ypsilanti Commercial* of Saturday, October 14, 1871. "The committee appointed at the meeting Tuesday evening met and decided to send these boxes to our naked and starving sufferers in that State. Messrs. I. N. Conkling and E. J. Mills have made splendid contributions in rolls of cloth."

Ypsi's Neptune not forgotten

Was the work of the men of the Neptune completely forgotten? Not likely, for a few years after the fire, when Chicago had rebuilt itself into a modern community, the city hosted a gathering of firefighters. This gathering included men from Ypsilanti. At the end of the gathering, the firefighters formed a parade, with the men from Ypsilanti at the front. As the men from Ypsilanti marched down the street, the crowds on each side cheered them wildly.

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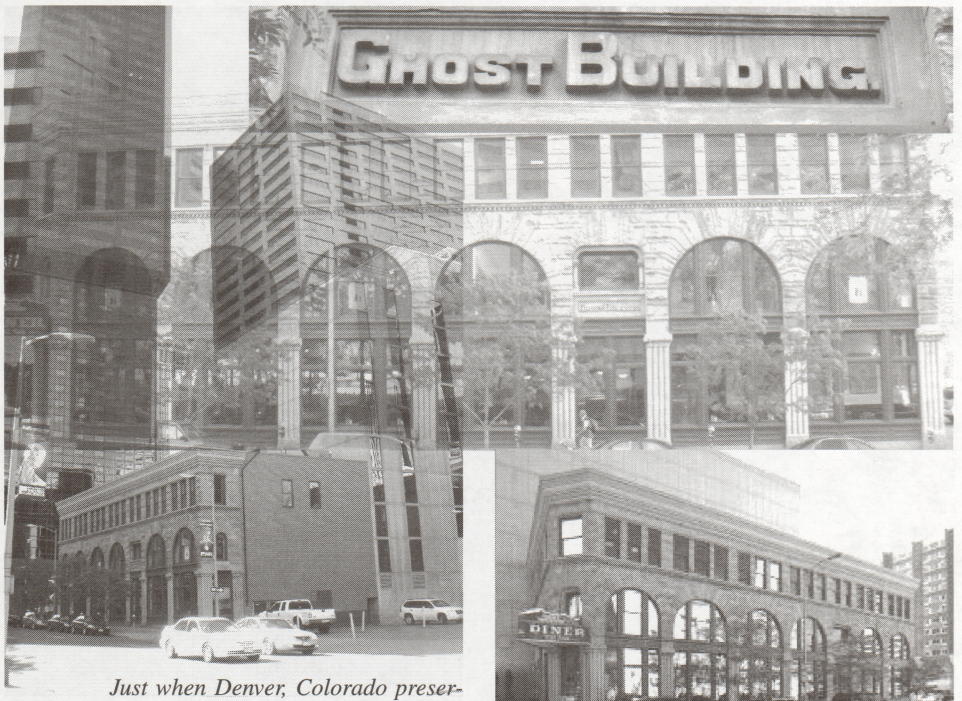

Just when Denver, Colorado preservationists thought they had lost another historic property, one of their favorites showed up again on the corner of 18th and Stout

Ghost Building reappears in Denver

Denver, Colorado's Ghost Building was built for A.H. Ghost in the late 1800s at 14th and Glenarm Streets by architect William Lang. The structure was dismantled from its original location in 1974. Its 1700-stone façade was removed piece by piece, numbered and stored for a decade. Brown-Schrepferman's construction team, in business in Denver since 1889, reassembled this historic building on the corner of 18th and Stout in downtown Denver in 1984. The shell of the building was reconstructed using the original details and stone façade, in conjunction with modern building material for a totally new interior and back supporting walls.

The Ghost Building now houses the Rocky Mountain Diner on the first floor, a law firm on the third floor, and rentable open space on the second floor. It is nearly surrounded by giant modern high-rises.

The façade parts were reassembled at another location, the usage was changed, and the entry was shifted from near the center of the long façade to the corner, disqualifying the structure for historic preservation tax credits.

In the next *Rag*:

Has the 2nd Dystopian Period returned? Living on the streets is not a quaint local festival any more

Depot Town Rag

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The Depot Town Association, Inc.

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Michelle Shankwiler, Vice President
Ruth Ann Jamnick, Treasurer
Sandee French, Scy. & Past President
Website: www.depottown.org

DTA meets at 6:30 p.m on the third Wednesday of each month at Café Luwak, 42 East Cross Street.

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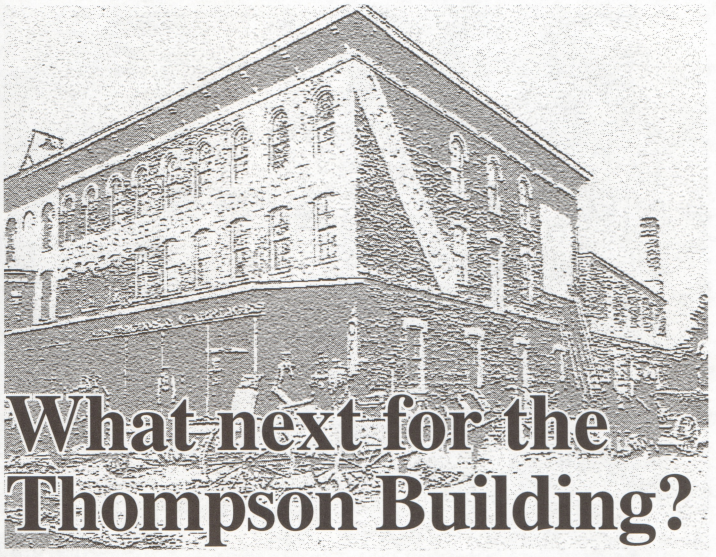
The Thompson Building just before The Fire of 2009



What next for the Thompson Building?

Property search

Researching the Thompson Building must be only about half as difficult as similar research in New Orleans, LA after Hurricane Katrina.

Part of rebuilding New Orleans caused residents often to be challenged with the task of tracing home titles back potentially hundreds of years. With a community rich with history stretching back over two centuries, houses have been passed along through generations of family, sometimes making it quite difficult to establish ownership.

A New Orleans lawyer sought an FHA loan for a client. He was told the loan would be granted if he could prove satisfactory title to a parcel of property being offered as collateral. The title to the property dated back to 1803, which took the lawyer three months to track down. After sending the information to the FHA, he received the following reply.

Actual reply from FHA:

"Upon review of your letter adjoining your client's loan application, we note that the request is supported by an Abstract of Title. While we compliment the able manner in which you have prepared and presented the application, we must point out that you have only cleared title to the proposed collateral property back to 1803. Before final approval can be accorded, it will be necessary to clear the title back to its origin."

Annoyed, the lawyer responded:

"Your letter regarding title in Case No.189156 has been received. I note that you wish to have title extended further than the 206 years covered by the present application. I was unaware that any educated person in this country, particularly those working in the property area, would not know that Louisiana was purchased by the United States from France in 1803, the year of origin identified in our application. For the edification of uninformed FHA bureaucrats, the title to the land prior to U.S. ownership was obtained from France, which had acquired it by Right of Conquest from Spain. The land came into the possession of Spain by Right of Discovery made in the year 1492 by a sea captain named Christopher Columbus, who had been granted the privilege of seeking a new route to India by the Spanish monarch, Queen Isabella. The good Queen Isabella, being a pious woman and almost as careful about titles as the FHA, took the precaution of securing the blessing of the Pope before she sold her jewels to finance Columbus's expedition.

Now the Pope, as I'm sure you may know, is the emissary of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and God, it is commonly accepted, created this world. Therefore, I believe it is safe to presume that God also made that part of the world called Louisiana. God, therefore, would be the owner of origin and His origins date back to before the beginning of time, the world as we know it, and the FHA. I hope you find God's original claim to be satisfactory. Now, may we have our damn loan?"

The loan was immediately approved.

[results of on-the-street polling]

- Parking structure
- Replica/monument of previous tenants
- Parade grandstands
- Keep the northern section, add a compatible new building in the burned-out south section of that private property
- Sell the bricks as a fundraiser
- Historical marker for railroad workers
- War memorial: Civil War-thru-Iraq War
- Firefighter's memorial
- Mirrored structure to reflect the rest of the block all the way to Ann Arbor
- Diorama of Union soldiers getting on the train to go to war with the Confederacy
- A new fire station and east side city hall
- New depot for the commuters
- Mini-mall with beer, ice cream, bread, and Lotto tickets
- Fill the corner with those big wacko waving inflatable arm-waving tube men dressed in the uniforms of the Grand Army of the Republic

From "Ozymandias"

by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1817)

"...Look on my works, ye Mighty,
and despair!'
Nothing beside remains.
Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

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Hear the music on the street. September songs reach into autumn; kids and adults tickling the ivories downtown and in Depot Town. Professional artists, graduates of John Thompson's Adult Beginner's Song Book, and folks who only knew how to play "Heart and Soul" from their old days at summer camp sat down to play pianos on the sidewalks here last month. The placement of a eight pianos from Steinway Piano Galleries of Detroit brought Brahms, barrelhouse, blues, and boogie to Ypsilanti's neighborhoods.

Instigator Korin Amos says the impromptu concerts could be extended even beyond the planned mid-October end date depending on audience, performer, and supplier acceptance.

Thanks to all who shared their talents at the keyboards these past few weeks. It was another memorable month of music in this old town. The melody lingers on....on Pianos 'Round Town.

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RAGTIME Coming events

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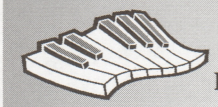

Through mid-October
Pianos 'Round Town
continues on the streets of Downtown and Depot Town

Crafters Market
3-7 p.m. Saturdays thru end of October
On the plaza next to the freighthouse
• Handmade jewelry, windchimes, candles, dog coats, dog treats
• Handpainted seashells & note cards
• Hand knitted items,
• Homemade baked goods & jams.

Antiques & Collectables
2nd & 4th Saturday

Yard Sales
1st Saturday
(no clothes)

Crafters interested in joining the Crafters Market $6 per event Antiques & Collectables or the Yard Sale events $10 per event.

Special thanks to all the car and biker exhibitors and fans who filled our streets all summer long!

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So long, Mr. Thompson

We all know your building down in Depot Town across from the MCRR depot. It's the one everybody asks about. "When are you going to get the place in order?" We have never had a very good answer for the past several decades.

We saw it in the history books and we carried some of that history with us. Some of us worked there; others just broke in to smoke some dope there. A few buisnesses thrived on the first floor, far from the roof leaks. Some people even lived in it, but without legal status.

We saw your old building as a backdrop for parades and street festivals. It most recently looked like it was gazing wistfully toward Ann Arbor, Chicago, and maybe even as far away as Californinia.

Then came the fire and it spent another year crying. And we all cried along with that sorry pile of bricks.

Some of us can remember the targets on the windows from fifty years ago. Others only remember the constant litigation with a previous owner whose attorneys must have been craftier than the city's.

Now there is a plan to restore your once-proud address to its previous sad condition. We were hoping for a lot more.

Good luck, Mr. T. We miss you.

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